

32. Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon

Wilfred Owen

Anthem for Doomed Youth (1917) 122

The following poem is an anthem, an important religious song (often expressing joy); here, it becomes a solemn tribute to dead soldiers.

What passing-bells² for these who die as cattle?
 Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering³ rifles' rapid rattle
 Can patter out their hasty orisons⁴.
 5 No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
 The shrill, demented choirs⁵ of wailing⁶ shells;
 And bugles⁷ calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
 10 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 Shall shine the holy glimmers⁸ of goodbyes.
 The pallor of girls' brows⁹ shall be their pall¹⁰;
 Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
 And each slow dusk¹¹ a drawing-down of blinds.

1. **doomed:** destined to die
2. **passing-bells:** bells used after a person's death
3. **stuttering:** it. *balbettanti*
4. **patter out ... orisons:** say their prayers mechanically or indistinctly
5. **shrill ... choirs:** it. *i cori striduli, forsennati*
6. **wailing:** howling, crying
7. **bugles:** trumpets
8. **holy glimmers:** it. *santi luccichii*
9. **brows:** it. *fronti*
10. **pall:** it. *drappo funebre*
11. **dusk:** it. *tramonto*

Siegfried Sassoon

They (1917) 123

One of Siegfried Sassoon's (1886-1967) most famous poems, *They*, focuses on religious authority, embodied by the Bishop, who, like other authority figures, holds the fates of the younger generation in his hands. He addresses 'They', a nameless mass of veterans, in a vain attempt of war propaganda.

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back
 'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
 'In a just cause: they lead the last attack
 'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought
 5 'New right to breed an honourable race,
 'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
 'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind¹;
 'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
 10 'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
 'A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change.'
 And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

(From *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*, 1918)

1. **stone blind**: totally blind